



Back to the future

...in which Tellurium Q resurrects a name from its designer's illustrious past. **David Price** gets set for some time travelling

Hi-fi is full of fantastic stories, tales of great products that came along and took the world by storm. And then there are the those that reside in the 'long lost' category – often these designs are no less able, but for any number of reasons failed to gain traction in the market and never quite made the transition from cult to classic. Inca Tech's Claymore is precisely this. Launched at around the same time as the Audiolab 8000a in

the eighties, it was a far better sounding amplifier (despite being only a little more expensive) and won plenty of friends during its short life, but sadly not enough. The Inca Tech story is one for another day, but the headline we can take from it was the name of the man who designed this excellent amplifier, one Colin Wonfor. There has been some carping on hi-fi forums that the new Claymore's £3,760 sticker price is too expensive. In the sense that it is a lot more than

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Tellurium Q Claymore
ORIGIN
UK
TYPE
Integrated amplifier
WEIGHT
6.2kg
DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
490 x 75 x 240mm
FEATURES
• Quoted power 72W RMS per channel (8ohms)
• Switchable MM/MC phono input
• Built-in USB DAC
• 6.3mm headphone jack
DISTRIBUTOR
Tellurium Q
TELEPHONE
01458 251997
WEBSITE
telluriumq.com

the original mid-eighties Inca Tech integrated's £345 price, then yes it is. Even allowing for inflation, to be the true spiritual successor to the original, it would have to land at around £1,500, which is Creek Destiny territory. So, for those fans of the original suggesting this new one is overpriced, I'd suggest you think of it as more of a 'Super Claymore' with added bells and whistles – specifically a USB DAC. For me, the real issue is not whether it is or isn't the true son and heir to a great eighties amp of the same name, it's just how it compares to rival sub-£4,000 integrations.

By some criteria, the answer is badly. Not to put too fine a point on it, Sugden's Masterclass IA-4 is a far better built and finished affair, feeling every penny of its £4,100 price tag. The Tellurium Q – at least if appearances are anything to go by – doesn't feel too many pennies of its price. That's not to say the amp is cheaply built, it's just poorly detailed in some ways. It is an avowedly 'all things to all men' sort of design, which is why it has a built-in DAC and full remote functionality, yet people looking for a versatile, easy-to-use

super integrated would likely spend a minute with the fiddly new Claymore and then buy the Sugden. More of which in a minute...

According to Tellurium Q, the new Claymore bears "little comparison to the original design, but there is a similar family sound". It is based on a new generation of analogue MOSFET power output modules, which are

It's fair to say the Claymore's looks and ergonomics aren't the best

much more linear than those of yore and also features lots of internal wiring that the designer believes to be preferable to doing everything on PCBs. There are 14 separate power supplies used (as opposed to four in the original) and all control and digital functions are isolated from the analogue power supplies to reduce noise and interference. As mentioned, a USB DAC is fitted, and this is only powered up when the USB port is in use and a special proprietary digital filter has been used.

The Claymore has no source selector on its fascia and this is a big mistake, because it necessitates the use of the remote control, which is very poor – its sensor has a very narrow field of view that makes the amp extremely fiddly to use. Another operational quirk is the slipperiness of the feet. They're hard translucent resin plastic affairs designed to give a "tiny point of contact... to mimic to a small extent the function of a spike without damaging what it is standing on". Apparently aesthetic reasons also played a part too, but whatever the thinking behind them they are infuriatingly slippery on my Audiophile Furniture Base Isolation platform (and worse on others). I end up dropping the amp onto sorbothane Foculpods and the sliding stops and the amp sounds better. Other niggles include a click when switching off and an audible buzz from the mains transformer. Ho hum!

Sound quality

This is a lovely performer – proving natural, easy and fluid almost to a fault. It's not obviously tube or transistor, Class AB or A or anything else for that matter. It just sounds right, offering the very rare combination of an effortless musicality and lots of detail and

depth. You simply don't focus on the amplifier as it covers its tracks so skillfully and instead get on with the music. In a way, the original Claymore did this, but to a lesser extent. At first listen it was a big, warm and musical design with a rich bass and a sweet treble. But there was always just a trace of solid-state 'hash' hanging around in the background and a slightly shiny upper mid that so many MOSFET amps of the day had. The new Claymore sounds tighter, clearer, smoother, better resolved and more detailed, without losing the original's *joie-de-vivre*. It's fascinating to think

This is one of the few integrations able to get the best out of a good vinyl front end

that the same designer can get a very similar family sound using very different components.

The new Tellurium Q is a highly transparent solid-state amplifier then, with high levels of detail and great grip, yet it never actually presents itself as such. Indeed, the clever thing is it pretty much gets out of the way, leaving the music to do the talking. Cue up Brand X's *Sun In The Night*, and you soon find yourself luxuriating in its lovely, lilting musicality, great speed and fine dynamic articulation, and the amazingly deft way it renders the recording acoustic in all its 'technicolour' glory. You suddenly realise that this amplifier does one of the best vanishing acts at or near the price, and that puts it in some pretty exalted company. The music just flows and the listener gets pulled into its wide and enveloping soundstage.

Switch to some punchy eighties pop courtesy of Scritti Politti's *The Word* ▶

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Loudspeaker binding post
- 2 3.5mm mini-jack
- 3 Earthing post
- 4 MM/MC phono switch
- 5 RCA line input socket
- 6 USB socket

Q&A

Colin Wonfor

Tellurium Q technical director



DP: Why resurrect the 'Claymore' name for your new amplifier?

CW: Both are/were Class AB integrated amplifiers, and the original Claymore was an excellent amplifier, so we thought we would bring it bang up to date in terms of functionality and performance. This is the way the market is moving so it was really a no brainer!

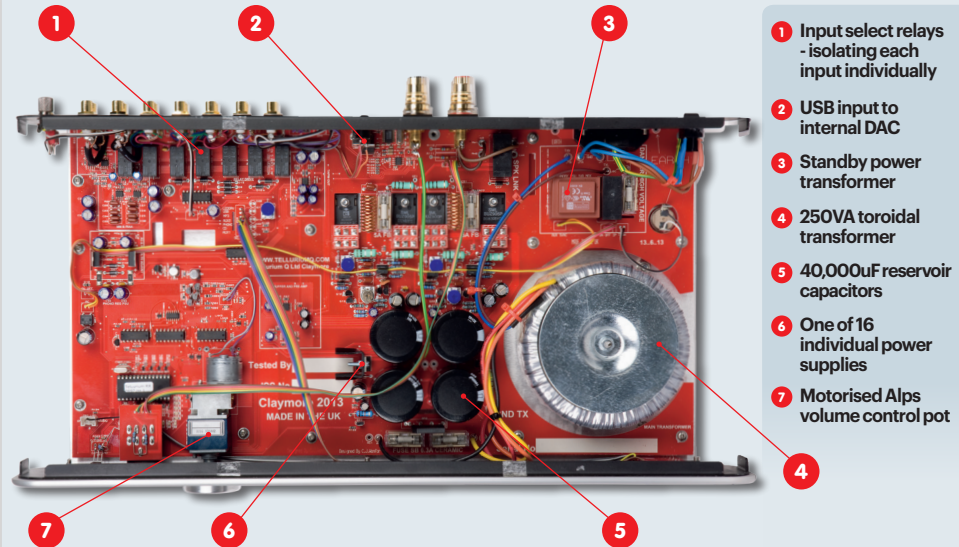
What sort of buyer is the new amplifier aimed at?

Simple – it's for people who love good sound yet also need decent functionality. It provides a range of inputs with connectivity to all sources and it has been done properly. Indeed, the phono stage is so good that it would work well as a one-stop solution for vinyl lovers who don't want masses of kit lying around. We included a DAC for added convenience for the owner too, complete with our own proprietary filter because this really improved its sound.

In what technical respects does it differ from the original Claymore?

There's very little comparison to the original design, although there is a similar family sound. Bass is more controlled and there is much greater dynamic performance and detail – that's because there are 14 separate power supplies in this Claymore and only four in the original. The new amp has microprocessor control and digital conversion, but these are isolated from the analogue power supplies to reduce noise and interference. For example, the power supply for the DAC only functions when the USB port is active, and the power supply for the IR detector is active 100ms after the button is pushed on the remote and is then turned off. Finally, this Claymore uses a new generation of analogue MOSFET power devices, which are much more linear and require different drive techniques to implement. Oh, and the components available today are far better than those of 30 years ago, technology has moved on.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Input select relays - isolating each input individually
- 2 USB input to internal DAC
- 3 Standby power transformer
- 4 250VA toroidal transformer
- 5 40,000uF reservoir capacitors
- 6 One of 16 individual power supplies
- 7 Motorised Alps volume control pot

Girl and the big fat bassline swings along with great aplomb. The amp certainly doesn't sound like it has vast Krell-like reserves of power and is not able to churn out huge tracts of low frequencies into super-demanding loads, but neither is it obviously weak kneed. It's less of an American muscle car in this respect and more like a well set-up Lotus sportster – because it is so fast and agile. However, the Claymore isn't just all about attack transients, because it has a pleasingly rich tonality; it's not fat or bloated in the least, but it does take the time to convey the texture of the instruments it is playing. This combination of speed and grip, allied to the ability to drill down right into the timbre of the sounds, is as pleasing as it is rare. The result is that singer Green Gartside's falsetto vocals come over as beautifully smooth and seamless, yet very expressive. Behind him, those chiming electronic keyboards play away with great expressiveness.

Like the original Claymore, this new one comes with a very good phono stage, switchable between moving magnet and moving coil on the back panel. This is emphatically not something that Tellurium Q has thrown in to up the feature count; I find it sounds superb, with Deodato's *Midnight Cruiser* an absolute joy to listen to. It proves very detailed yet wonderfully bouncy and dynamic. This is one of the few integrations of recent times I've heard that are able to really get the best out of a good vinyl front end; only when you start spending £500 or more on an offboard phono stage will you get an appreciably better sound. The DAC

input is good too, but not as stellar as the phono stage; a £400 Audiolab Q DAC does much better, with more detail, air and space.

Conclusion

This is a superb-sounding integrated amplifier, but its ergonomics frankly need a little more fettling. Until you actually hear the thing, the user experience isn't particularly appealing – but hopefully the remote control will be improved by the time full production is underway. Certainly though, once your listening session is underway you'll have no qualms, as this is a very accomplished performer that is head and shoulders above cheaper integrated amplifiers, and one of the very best at its price. The Claymore's all-round sonic charm makes it an interesting new addition to the market, and one that is well worth seeking out to audition if you're looking for a great sounding integrated that gets out of the way of the music as much as possible ●



HOW IT COMPARES
Sugden's IA-4 (£4,100) is an obvious rival and a testing one too. The Sugden is bigger and superficially at least appears better finished. On switch-on the full Class A Sugden gets very hot, so best change all your house's light bulbs to LED ones to compensate for the higher electricity bill! Sonically, it's very clean, crisp, and spry. The Tellurium Q is too, just not to the same degree, it doesn't quite have the 'direct sunlight' white light of the Sugden. Moreover, the Claymore is extremely rhythmically fluid, whereas the IA-4 isn't so much – the former just lilts along in a wonderfully beguiling and effortless way.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Sweet, musical sound; excellent phono input

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Poor ergonomics; sub-par remote control

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: An excellent sounding yet well specified integrated

FEATURES



OVERALL

